

KINSHIP

by Carey Perloff

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**CAST:**

THE PLAY IS TO BE PERFORMED BY THREE ACTORS AS FOLLOWS:

**SHE** is a married newspaper editor in her late forties, passionate, intelligent, besotted, slightly falling apart.

**HE** is a newspaper reporter in his late thirties, complicated, sexy, sometimes sweet, urbane, competitive, afraid.

**HIS MOTHER**, an ex-actress and devoted if over-protective mother in her seventies, still very attractive, who is also (unbeknownst to SHE) **THE OLDER FRIEND**.

**TIME AND PLACE:**

This is a play about heat and desire, about transgressive love and professional politics. It could take place anywhere at any time, in almost any city in America, probably on the West Coast. It should be performed straight through in one act, like a train headed for disaster.

The contemporary story refers to a theatrical production of Racine's *PHÈDRE*. Where lines from PHEDRE are heard, I have used the translation of Timberlake Wertenbaker, to whom I am deeply grateful.

July 12, 2015 Williamstown draft

PROLOGUE

A POOL OF LIGHT COMES UP ON SHE, OBSESSING.

SHE

Oh my god. I'm fucked. How do I know if I want him to write for the paper because I'm in love with him or if I'm in love with him because I want him to write for the paper? And am I overestimating his talent because I'm obsessed with him or am I unnecessarily hard on him because I'm scared that I'm overestimating his talent because I'm obsessed with him, and how do I know if he's working with me because it's the job he wants or because I'm the woman he wants or if I'm the woman he wants *because* it's the job he wants?—and if neither of *us* knows what the real story is, how is anyone else to know? So no wonder it's so fucked up.

THE LIGHT SHIFTS.

SCENE 1

COFFEE SHOP. A MORNING IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, RIGHT BEFORE LABOR DAY. SHE IS HAVING BREAKFAST WITH HER FRIEND (WHO IS ALSO HIS MOTHER).

FRIEND

(SMILING) *Two* breakfast dates in one week! To what do I owe the honor?

SHE

The boys are always with daddy and the grandparents for Labor Day. Why shouldn't I be with you?

FRIEND

(FLATTERED) You could've just slept in...

SHE

I'll sleep when I'm dead. (LOOKS AROUND FOR A WAITER) I need coffee.

FRIEND

I thought once you'd released that online thingy you'd be able to relax!

SHE

You mean the app? The verb is "launched". Like a ship.

FRIEND

Regardless, I don't trust the news in any form.

SHE

How do you ever know what's going on in the world?

FRIEND

I look at people's expressions on the bus. Why didn't you go with the boys?

SHE

The in-laws have no cell service and no WiFi. I start to panic. I need some surprises, you know that, I'm a reporter! (HER PHONE RINGS) Sorry-- one sec--(SHE ANSWERS IT) So? (BEAT) Tell me. Uh huh. Is that good? As compared to what? (PAUSE) Wow. *Really* good. Especially for *Labor Day*, who would've-- (PAUSE. LAUGHING) Right—wait till they—(LAUGHING) Excellent. Spread the word. And keep me posted. (SHE HANGS UP) The app. It's a hit. Who knew!

FRIEND

*You* knew. Brava.

SHE

I'm so glad I stayed in town. This is going to be fun!

FRIEND

(WICKEDLY) Not nearly as fun as going somewhere with no cell service. Your husband must be in bliss.

SHE

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He is. No emergency morphine drips, no pregnant women begging for epidurals—just a lake and a lot of clouds. See? Two minutes there and I go into a total depression-- but they love it. So it's all good. They're happy going, and I'm happy staying.

FRIEND

Well then, since you're happy staying, can I lure you to something interesting tomorrow night?

SHE

I'm not sure I like the way that sounds.

FRIEND

It's a play.

SHE

Oh! I was imagining naked yoga—(HER PHONE RINGS AGAIN)—hang on— let me just--(SHE ANSWERS IT) Hey! (BEAT) Yes, I heard. Three thousand since -- (BEAT) I *know*-- a thousand—we expected a *thousand*—this is good. Revise the press release and resend it. And tweet the figures. (BEAT) OK—do it again. Every fifteen minutes. Thanks. (SHE HANGS UP. SMILES) Crazy day. So—you want me to go to a play?

FRIEND

One of my students gave me tickets—it's in a tiny space with only thirty seats—

SHE

God! What if there's audience participation?!

FRIEND

I hear it's very sexy...

SHE

I'm too old for sexy! (LAUGHING) Come on-- I hate theater—you know I hate theater—

FRIEND

You can't hate it—you grew up with it—

SHE

Exactly. (SHE SMILES) I'm sorry. I'm awful. Take someone appreciative!

FRIEND

Maybe my son will come...

SHE

Your son?

FRIEND

He's come back.

SHE

The mystery man from California? No kidding! For good?

FRIEND

Looks that way.

SHE

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I'm so curious—you've never even shown me a photograph—

FRIEND

He's wildly charming—but hard to capture.

SHE

How come he's back in town?

FRIEND

I guess he started worrying about my being all alone. He decided he wanted to come back. I mean, *I* wanted it, but I tried not to beg...

SHE

Good for you. Never beg.

FRIEND

It's taken forever—he's a slow burn, if you know what I mean...

SHE

I have to meet him! Does he look like you?

FRIEND

Not in the slightest, he's gorgeous.

SHE

*You're* gorgeous. Why did you stop acting?

FRIEND

Oh my darling, that was *years* ago!

SHE

Yes but we've only known each other since mother's funeral—I have a lot of catching up to do...

FRIEND

Let's not sully this breakfast with details of my sordid past. It's a tissue of clichés!

SHE

Now I *really* want to know! How sordid?!

FRIEND

(WITH GREAT MOCK IRONY) It was the *theater*! We were on the *road*! He was my leading *man*!

SHE

(AMAZED) No!

FRIEND

He couldn't even *act*, but I believed every word! That's the beauty of having an affair with an actor—someone else has written all his lines!

SHE

(NODDING) But then when the play's over...

FRIEND

... reality slowly rears its sad little head. And the curtain comes crashing down.

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SHE

Wow. Thank god I'm a journalist.

FRIEND

It was delicious while it lasted. (CHANGING THE SUBJECT) I hope my son will like being back.

SHE

Are you worried?

FRIEND

I hope you'll like him.

SHE

How could I not!

FRIEND

I hope he'll want to *stay*.

SHE

He will. Just don't fuck up his homecoming with too much bad theater. (ANSWERING HER PHONE) What? Are you kidding? Then get down there—now!

FRIEND

(LOOKING UP) Here's the coffee.

SHE

(OH PHONE) I know it's fucking *Labor Day*—who's on the desk? (TO HER FRIEND) I'm so sorry—I'm actually going to have to run!

FRIEND

No breakfast?

SHE

I can't! Out app says there's trouble at the Port... rumors are flying!

FRIEND

Take the pancakes to go!

SHE

You eat them for me. Bye darling. (ON PHONE) Find Martinez! *Fuck* the holiday—this could be big! (SHE RUSHES OFF. HER FRIEND WATCHES)  
CROSSFADE.

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SCENE 2

IN THE DARKNESS WE HEAR APPLAUSE. WE FIND OURSELVES IN A THEATER IN THE BASEMENT OF A CHURCH, AT THE END OF A PERFORMANCE OF PHÈDRE.

HE

Wow. That was intense.

MOTHER

When Sarah Bernhardt played Phèdre, she did every monologue twice.

HE

Sounds like torture! Why?

MOTHER

(SMILING) To make sure they got the point, I guess.

HE

What a welcome home gift. (AS IF A NEWSPAPER HEADLINE) “Lusty stepmother goes nuts, poisons herself over embarrassing confession...”

MOTHER

She was in love! I thought you’d enjoy it.

HE

(LAUGHING) God, Ma, I forgot what hanging out with you was *like*—

MOTHER

You used to *adore* theater!

HE

No, I was force-fed from infancy by a fanatic actress.

MOTHER

Ex-actress. Now I’m just the audience, alas. (BRIGHTENING) I have to say—I was moved. Really. To pull off passion on that scale in a *crypt*—that’s not easy. I mean, who does PHÈDRE in a church basement!

HE

You have to admit the premise is a stretch. An entire court is torn apart by the obsessive desire of a Queen who barely even *touches* the guy she’s in love with?

MOTHER

That’s why it’s a tragedy! (BEAT) She was a little weepy, in my opinion...

HE

Who, Phèdre?

MOTHER

All those tears—I mean, make another *choice*—

HE

She was suffering!



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MOTHER

I think I find male suffering more interesting.

HE

I love you too.

MOTHER

(WICKEDLY) And the *Nurse*—if I'd played her... I'd have given her a little *wit*...

HE

*Wit* is tough when you're being driven into the sea...

MOTHER

That's just when you *need* a little wit!

HE

(LAUGHING) It's great to be back.

MOTHER

It's great for me. (EAGERLY) Can I come see the apartment?

HE

Not yet...

MOTHER

You haven't even told me about the job—

HE

I'm superstitious. Let's see if it sticks.

MOTHER

You're an adult. Make it stick.

HE

I'm doing it on my own this time, Ma.

MOTHER

Okay. (SHE SMILES) Watch how patient I can be in my old age.

HE

When I've bought a few plates and forks, I'll make you dinner, I promise...

MOTHER

I'm hungry already. (BEAT) I'm always hungry.

BLACKOUT.

**SCENE 3**

**IN THE HALLWAY OF A NEWSPAPER OFFICE IN EARLY SEPTEMBER. THEY COLLIDE AND HER PAPERS FALL TO THE GROUND—HE KNEELS DOWN TO PICK THEM UP.**

HE  
Oh! Shit—sorry! Let me—(COLLECTING PAPERS. LOOKS UP AND SEES THAT IT’S HER)—  
Good morning!

Morning. SHE

Forgive me—I must’ve been sleepwalking— HE

No worries— SHE

Listen-- did you happen—? HE

Sorry? SHE

I was just wondering— HE

Yes? SHE

That piece I wrote? On the water treatment scandal—? Did you—? HE

Was that yours? SHE

I contributed— HE

Hot lede. SHE

Sorry? HE

SHE  
That lede was great. Which is useful when you’re talking about shit.

HE  
(LAUGHING) Right.

SHE